

Current Biology Vol 12 No 19
R642

between outbreak or epidemic. But when you see something that's involving so many people in so many states, I think it's probably helpful to think of it as an expanding, emerging infectious disease epidemic.' In what sense this was 'helpful,' she didn't say.

Not all broadcasts were so informative. CNN held true to its commitment to fill airtime regardless of whether it had factual information to contribute. The host of CNN Saturday Morning News asked network medical correspondent Elizabeth Cohen whether a person once infected with West Nile would become immune. Her reply: 'Unfortunately I'm unable to answer that question. I do not know, because there has been — this is — even though this has scared the everything out of all of us, this is a relatively new virus, it has only been around since 1999.'

The host chimed in helpfully, 'Elizabeth, I did actually read a little bit earlier that in a case of — if you have already been bitten — or if you have already been exposed to West Nile through a mosquito bite, that that does make you immune, and you're not likely to get it again. And that's just something I read through from the CDC reports during the week.'

Later in this unrehearsed (and obviously ill-prepared) segment, CNN went on to inform its viewers that West Nile differs from malaria in part because there is a vaccine for malaria. Oh really?

In contrast to that hand-wringing, the New York Times treated the story with sang froid (perhaps to confuse the mosquitoes?). One article led off, 'As West Nile fever spreads through the country, it is giving scientists a rare picture of how a virus carves a new ecological niche in a hemisphere where it has never been seen.' An opinion piece by John Barry at Tulane and Xavier universities noted that West Nile is considerably less deadly than St. Louis encephalitis, which has been causing illnesses and deaths in the United States since 1933, but has never enjoyed the notoriety of its African kin. 'Despite the publicity about the

disease, there is no indication that it will erupt into an epidemic,' he wrote the day before CDC director Gerberding declared otherwise on CBS.

The Ottawa Sun also noted the disproportionate attention being paid to a disease that kills far fewer people than lightning bolts. Ontario, it noted, is gearing up to spend \$9 million to fight West Nile Virus. 'That's half the annual budget for tobacco control. Tobacco kills 12,000 a year in Ontario; again, the running total for West Nile casualties in the province is zero.'

Most news articles concluded that West Nile is yet another fact of life Americans will have to cope

with. It will be an uphill battle for this disease to displace some of the more popular fears. Ann Brown, head of a consumer group called Safer America for Everyone, said she's worried that the West Nile panic will lead to overuse of the pesticide DEET. 'Children are at the lowest risk for West Nile virus,' Brown told USA Today. 'You don't want to give them another risk, which is to put too much chemical on them.'

Richard F. Harris is a science correspondent at National Public Radio and past president of the National Association of Science Writers. E-mail: rharris@nasw.org

Stem cell jitters

Launch of the European Union's new Framework research programme still has one worry. Nigel Williams reports.

Doubts about the European Union's plans to regulate funding of stem cell research continue to rumble and may still upset plans for the start of the next funding phase of the EU's biggest research programme. The EU's Framework 6 (FW6) is set to launch later this year. The 17.5 billion Euro budget for the programme, which will run for the next four years, funds collaborative research between scientists in member countries and some associated states, and included a significant share for biomedical research.

The issue of funding stem-cell research as part of the package has proved thorny with many member states opposed to any research on embryo-derived stem cells, particularly amongst predominantly southern Catholic states and Germany. In contrast, regulations to work on embryo-derived stem cells have already been established in the UK.

Spain, which held the EU presidency earlier this year, made great efforts to resolve the conflicting views by advocating the shift of EU funds for such work to adult-derived stem cells rather than embryo-derived cells. It was

thought they had managed to win agreement so that the FW6 programme could go ahead on schedule.

But Denmark, now holding the EU presidency, has raised fresh concerns about the EU's ability to monitor the ethical aspects of such research.

And a tough stance for funding embryo stem cell research would cause some problems for countries like the UK. Although EU research policy would not affect UK funded work, it could make it more difficult for UK researchers to collaborate with their European colleagues if EU funds were involved.

The European Commission in Brussels will now be working overtime to satisfy any Danish concerns. Particularly as the research commissioner, Philippe Busquin, has made great play of the timetable for implementation. 'For the first time in the history of Community research, we have not left adoption of the Framework Programme to the very last moment — we have the time to guarantee that it will be launched and implemented under the very best conditions,' he said.

All those eager to bid for the first tranche of funding under the new programme will be as keen as the administrators in Brussels that all these issues are resolved very soon.